

ALASKAN VILLAGES RECEIVE HUMAN SERVICES



Tearsheet requests to Thomas E. Brubeck, Office of Public Affairs, Social and Rehabilitation Service, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington, D.C. 20201.

The experiment in far-off Alaska has a lesson for our metropolitan areas, whether we are concerned with the delivery of medical, social, educational, or any other services. In spite of having a handful of workers covering vast distances, in addition to obstacles posed by weather and limited types of transportation and communications, the program is an example of how services can be unified to serve the whole man.—John D. Twiname, Administrator, Social and Rehabilitation Service, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

The social worker—a 23-year old Indian woman—stopped at the river's edge in Emmonak, Alaska, and took a picture of shacks which serve as homes for a dozen families. She met briefly with the head of the village council to see what families might be able to adopt a child. Then she talked with a man who had broken his back in a hunting accident.

Another social worker had been ice fishing and was making his way with his sled back to Kwiguk, Alaska, where the Yukon River empties into the Bering Sea. Later he would ask the family with the sick child if they had enough fuel and have a friendly visit with Franklin to see if he were still sober.

The subsistence fishing and visits were part of life and work for the Indian woman, who was reared in Emmonak, and the young Eskimo, who



Human services aides from villages along the Yukon River. Another group of aides takes social services to villages on the Kuskokwim River.



A Native with reindeer he shot near Mekoryuk. Because farming is almost impossible, hunting and fishing are not sports but means of survival.

was from a similar river town. Both workers were from the Rural Area Social Services project, which was supported from December 1968 to December 1970 by HEW's Social and Rehabilitation Service. The Indian woman and the Eskimo were among 19 human services aides taking part in an experimental program using Natives to deliver social services to a scattered population of 14,000 in southwest Alaska. As a result of the successful use of Natives as human services aides, the Division of Family and Children's Services in Alaska's Department of Health and Social Services is continuing the program and is considering how the social service techniques of aides can be used in other parts of the State.

The Aides and the Environment

The aides serve 50 villages dotting 60,000 square miles of tundra, rivers, and mountains. This triangle of barren, subarctic land is intersected by the Yukon River in the north and the Kuskokwim River in the south (see map). The Bering Sea forms the west coastline. The area's largest community is Bethel, which has a population of 2,000.

Three of the 19 social services aides are women. The aides share the ethnic background and language of the villages where they work, range in age from 22 to 59 years, and all but two are married.

About half of the aides had some high school education, two had not reached fifth grade, three had completed 12th grade, and one had some college

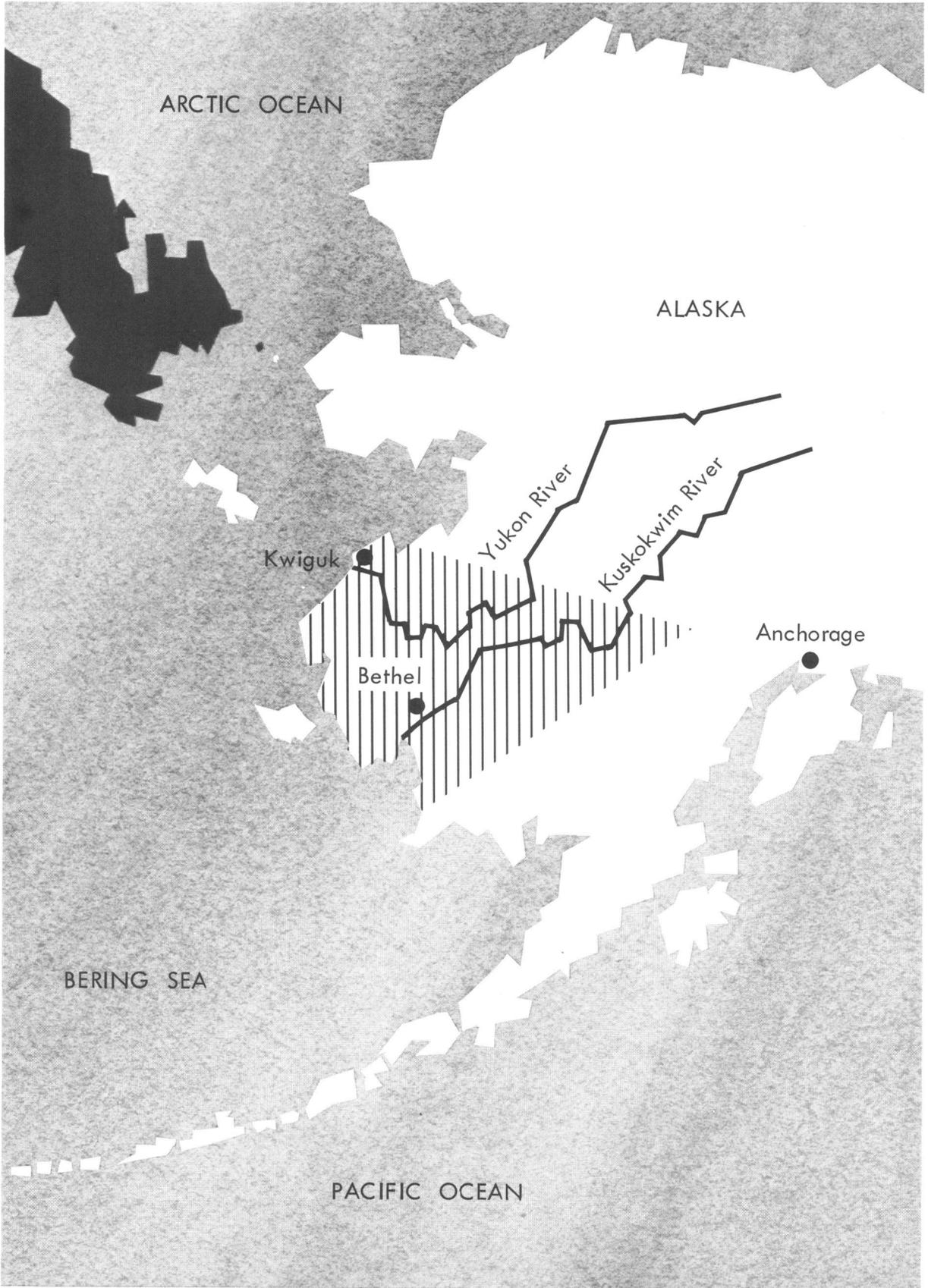
work. In this program they had 9 months' preparation, including two academic periods in Bethel and Anchorage and spent half the time in on-the-job training in the villages. Their average salary was \$8,400 a year plus about 12 percent in fringe benefits.

Most aides are leaders in their communities—members or presidents of their village councils, former magistrates or other officials, or persons respected for wisdom and experience. Many are also noted for their skills in hunting and fishing. To their jobs as human services aides, they brought an understanding of the area and its culture, sensitivity to the opportunities and threats of technological changes, and first-hand knowledge of what they can do for their people.

Most of the villages in the project are inhabited by Eskimos and the others, by Athapscan Indians. There are ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences among the villages, although life-styles are similar. Not infrequently, junk nailed to a 10- by 10-foot frame might be the year-round dwelling for several persons.

To most of the people, English is a foreign language. In addition to the communication problem, many Natives have little trust in the "gussak" (white man).

The aides, each serving two or more villages, must rely on their training and innate talents to operate without supervision. There is no telephone service and little radio communication. The weather is severe, and the aides must cover great distances with few roads and limited means of





Happiness is playing in the snow. Perhaps these children need not experience some of the hardships and hazards common among adults in their village.

transportation. The history of the region is accommodation to change caused by wildlife, weather, ravenous rivers, and now the mixed blessings of civilization.

A human services aide tells of using a skiff in midsummer "if water and weather not too bad. After freezeup," he continued, "snogo" (snowmobile). "Maybe fly on mail plane. Some still use dogsled. But many times, I walk in summer; is only way. Like last summer, some people were in fishcamp 8 miles from my village. It's 8 hours' walk. It took 2 days to go home. I have to sleep out. When I wake up, there is musk ox. No revolver. I wait; he goes, then I go."

Social and Medical Conditions

There is a strong work ethic among the Eskimos and Indians, yet full-time jobs hardly exist. In this land where "breakup" means a brief period

of fair weather and "freezeup" means exactly that for 8 months, growing crops is almost impossible.

Natives sustain themselves by high-risk, part-time work in canneries, fighting fires, hunting, and fishing. Serious injuries are frequent. Illness and accidental injury are important reasons for families receiving some form of public assistance, and they were the basis of many of the actions taken by human services aides (see table).

Respiratory diseases are common. Delayed medical attention in childbirth and early aging from exposure to hazards have been reported by the aides. Broken backs and other serious injuries result from falls while repairing houses, from boat accidents, and while hunting.

Alcoholism is widespread. Heavy drinking is tolerated unless it results in neglect of children, wife beating, or mismanagement of money. All of the aides had experiences dealing with the unfortunate plight of the aged.

In the villages, the aides help with unemployment matters, family planning, and child care services such as locating foster homes and preventing neglect of children. As shown in the table, the biggest concern with children relates to adoption and guardianship. Home management services have involved use of money, education, orga-

Classification of needs and problems reported on case service action reports

Category of needs and problems	Reports	
	Number	Percent
Unemployment or underemployment.....	56	17.1
Health, accident hazards requiring treatment.....	97	29.7
Physical illness.....	42	12.9
Accidental injury.....	14	4.3
Alcoholism.....	32	9.8
Other.....	9	2.7
Children.....	88	26.9
Abused, neglected.....	17	5.2
Removal from home.....	3	.9
Adoptions-guardianship.....	55	16.8
Return to home.....	6	1.8
Other.....	7	2.2
Housing.....	32	9.8
None available.....	4	1.2
Inadequate.....	25	7.7
Other.....	3	.9
Income-related.....	32	9.8
Unemployability.....	13	4.0
Mismanagement of money.....	13	4.0
Other.....	6	1.8
Educational obstacles.....	22	6.7
No school resources for children..	11	3.3
No job-training resources.....	11	3.3
Total.....	327	100.0

¹ Percentage rounded off.

nizing day care centers when possible, child rearing, and improving living conditions.

Services often are simple and basic. For example, an aide looked in on some children and reports: "Mr. and Mrs. A. drunk and leave their kids in their home and went to another village. So somebody in the village asked me to check them kids. . . . I went over to their house and saw two kids crying, little baby on the floor. . . . I looked around to someone who can take care of these kids so I didn't find anybody . . . so I take care of them."

Evaluating the Project

Evaluative research on the Rural Area Social Services project has been done by Frances Lomas Feldman, Ph.D., professor of social work at the University of Southern California, who said that findings point to the "dual approach" required if the conditions of villagers are to be improved. She said that, in addition to serving families, activities should be focused on community development.

Feldman points out the difficulty of working "in a village society that is in the midst of accelerated social change, and is attempting to cope with tremendous and often opposing forces of environmental and cultural shock.

"Though one-to-one service is beneficial and essential," said Feldman, "the pervasiveness of some individual and family problems and needs suggests that the individual method must be offered in tandem with methods dealing with problems on a broader community scale. When individual or family needs add up to a social problem in the village or community, the best way to alleviate them may be to act on a more nearly comprehensive scale rather than tackling problems family by family only."

The report stresses that the primitive struggle for subsistence does not leave much energy for correcting basic problems. But results of the program show that the workers could do much more in community development if given the resources—funds, knowledge, talents, and services.

Using certain inferences from the research report and other documents, Feldman assessed the data and developed a classification of social needs and services. Following are some of the points taken into account from the experiment in southwest Alaska:

- In the project area levels of need and want vary. Survival evolves around the need for food, clothing, and shelter.

- Until there is some respite from the struggle for survival, a person usually can divert little physical or emotional energy into correcting or preventing needs or problems.

- The problem of helping mobilize Native resources and energy beyond the first level is compounded because the struggle for survival is pervasive among them throughout the year.

- There are many ways for meeting social needs; there is no single method.

- The best persons to solve problems in remote and isolated communities might be those with inherent capacities for innovation and accommodation to adverse conditions without benefit of supervision.

- The aides, villages, and services required within each village vary.

- The assessment of how social needs are met, whether by families or villages, should be sensitive to the reciprocal relationship of the people and their physical environment, a relationship from which their life-styles have evolved over centuries and through which certain kinds of strengths have endured.

- Evaluation research should focus not on pathology but on the strengths with which problems can be solved.

Reports from aides and responses to their efforts suggest that the Natives are highly rational in viewing their culture as well as the white culture with which they have contact and that their way of life is not always bound by tradition. There is evidence the Natives are susceptible to change and seek it. The research report said that susceptibility to change was "repeatedly demonstrated in the way individuals and families sought and used the direct services which aides made available to them; it was strikingly evidenced in the ways villages have moved toward improving housing, developing cooperatives, instituting work projects, and in other ways reacting positively to the community development efforts of human services aides or others in the villages."

The Native aides understand the people who live on this barren tundra. In a wilderness where social work once was limited to financial payments, the aides have bridged two distances—cultural and geographic. The Native aides, now employees of Alaska's Department of Health and Social Services, met the objectives of delivering social services in rural areas, and plans are being made to expand the work to more of the remote villages of Alaska.